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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

September 12, 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ:

I write to you today to discuss more fully the second basic truth that I spoke of in my first pastoral letter issued on August 22, 2023: “The Eucharist and all the sacraments are divinely instituted, not developed by man. The Eucharist is truly Christ’s Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, and to receive Him in Communion unworthily (i.e. in a state of grave, unrepentant sin) is a devastating sacrilege for the individual and for the Church.” (1 Cor 11:27-29).

The sacraments are essential elements of the fullness of life in Christ and are, above all, a divine love story. The sacraments are channels of God’s divine grace which flow from Christ Himself, love incarnate among us, and sanctify each of us on our journey towards Heaven. They are visible signs of God’s love for us. Through worthy reception of the sacraments, God’s supernatural grace is brought forth in visible and tangible form, and the work of God’s salvation is made manifest in each of us. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.” (CCC 1131).

There are seven sacraments of the Catholic Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation (Confession), Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. The sacraments are not isolated from one another but instead are woven together in a unity of divine life that reflects and connects us to the ministry of Jesus Christ and His Church. The saints and Doctors of the Church have given us many beautiful reflections to ponder regarding the origin of the sacraments. St. Thomas Aquinas said that from the pierced side of Christ “flowed forth the sacraments of the Church, without which there is no entrance to the life which is the true life. That blood was shed for the remission of sins; that water it is that makes up the health-giving cup.”

The Eucharist is at the very center of our sacramental life because the Eucharist IS the Real Presence of Christ Himself. It is my intent in this letter to speak mainly of the Eucharist, and the importance of not receiving Our Lord in Communion unworthily. I will discuss the remaining sacraments in more detail in future pastoral letters.

The Eucharist: Simply put, the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. It is the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ—His Real Presence among us. When we consume the Eucharist, we are incorporated into Christ in a supernatural way, and we are also bound to all others who are of the Body of Christ.

Holy Communion is an intimate encounter with Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." (Jn 6:53-58).

One of the countless stories from the history of the Church provides a beautiful message of the power of the Eucharist. St. Damien of Molokai, a Belgian priest in the mid-19th century, was sent to the missionary fields of Hawaii where he would spend his life in the care and service of those who were afflicted with leprosy. For many years, St. Damien loved and took care of the leper colony single-handedly, tending to the physical and spiritual needs of all in the community. One might wonder what could have given him the spiritual strength for such a difficult and heart-wrenching mission, a mission that ended with his contracting and dying from the disease himself. St. Damien gives us the answer; he said it was the Eucharist. St. Damien wrote, "Were it not for the constant presence of our Divine Master in our humble chapel, I would not have found it possible to persevere in sharing the lot of the afflicted in Molokai ... The Eucharist is the bread that gives strength ... It is at once the most eloquent proof of His love and the most powerful means of fostering His love in us. He gives Himself every day so that our hearts as burning coals may set afire the hearts of the faithful." The Eucharist was St. Damien's spiritual strength, and the Lord wants it to be our strength as well.

Living a sacramental life as members of the Catholic Church, the mystical Body of Christ, hinges on belief in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. From the very beginning of the Church until today, saints and martyrs have lived and died for their belief in the Real Presence; kings and commoners have knelt side by side in their belief in the Real Presence; and countless Eucharistic miracles throughout the world continue to testify to Our Lord's Real Presence in the Eucharist. Throughout the ages, the Church came to a deeper and more profound understanding of this sacred mystery which we now know as the dogma of transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is the word the Church uses to describe the change that takes place at each mass when the priest pronounces the words of consecration: "This is my Body." "This is My Blood." When these sacred words are spoken by the priest, the substance of the bread and wine are transformed by Our Lord into His body and blood, and only the appearances (that is, the physical properties) of bread and wine remain. Our senses cannot perceive this change, but at this sacred moment when Heaven and Earth meet, the risen Christ is truly made present for us in every mass, just as He told us He would be: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matt 28:20).

As Catholics, we are joyfully bound to believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells us: "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Cor 11:27-29).

We pray at every Mass immediately before receiving the Body of Christ in Communion, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” As we pray this prayer, we acknowledge that we are all sinners and therefore unworthy to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord of our own accord, but we acknowledge that His supreme work of mercy makes us worthy—if we choose to accept His grace and conform our lives to His. The essential call is for all of us individually to do our best to seek holiness and to ensure that any mortal sin of which we are conscious has been sacramentally confessed prior to receiving Holy Communion. To receive the Eucharist while ignoring unrepented mortal sin in our lives or without discerning Our Lord’s Real Presence brings spiritual destruction rather than a deeper life in Christ.

A mortal sin is any sin whose matter is grave and which has been committed willfully and with full knowledge of its seriousness. These grave matters include (but are not limited to): murder, receiving or participating in abortion, homosexual acts, sexual intercourse outside marriage or in an invalid marriage, deliberately engaging in impure thoughts, the use of contraception, etc. If you have questions regarding sins or the need for sacramental confession, I urge you to talk to your parish priest; and if you have committed a mortal sin, I implore you to go to confession before receiving the Eucharist.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law states, “A person who is conscious of a grave sin is not to ... receive the body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession unless a grave reason is present and there is no opportunity of confession; in this case the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible.” (CIC 916). This teaching is also found in the Didache, an early Christian document dating from around A.D. 70. These documents, written almost 2,000 years apart, highlight the Church’s constant understanding of the importance of being aware of our sins and seeking sacramental confession when it is needed. If we intentionally live in a manner which runs contrary to the teaching of the Catholic faith, and we obstinately hold to beliefs that contradict the truth which the Church teaches, we place ourselves in a state of grave spiritual danger. We can take comfort that this can be remedied since God’s abundant mercy is always available to us, but we must humbly repent and confess our sins to receive His forgiveness.

This brings me to another point I would like to discuss since it is likely to be discussed at the upcoming Synod on Synodality. There has been much discussion regarding individuals who self-identify as members of the LGBTQ community who seek to receive Holy Communion. I feel it is important to state the following in this pastoral letter: The Church offers love and friendship to all LGBTQ individuals, as Christ offers to each one of us, and the Church seeks to enable every person to live out the authentic call to holiness that God intends for them. We must be clear, however, that the Church cannot offer a person Holy Communion if that person is actively engaging in a same-sex relationship, or if a person is not living as the sex that God formed them to be at their conception and birth. The Church teaches that those who experience feelings of same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria do not sin simply because they have such feelings, but freely acting upon those feelings is sinful and not in accordance with God’s design for His children. For those who experience these feelings, it is indeed a difficult path so I encourage you to seek the spiritual and emotional support of your parish priest and of family and friends of faith who can help you to discern and live out the authentic call to holiness God intends for you. I would also offer this—regardless of who we

are, we must always remember that following Jesus means following the way of the Cross. It will be difficult, but rest assured, He walks it with us if we ask Him.

Additionally, I want to state clearly that the Church has never and will never condone the reception of the Eucharist by a Catholic who persists in any adulterous union. A person must first repent of the sin of adultery and receive sacramental absolution, and also have the firm resolution to avoid this sin in the future. In other words, the adultery must end for the individual to receive Holy Communion. For those who may have been in a previous marriage and have divorced and now seek to remarry, I would urge you to speak to your parish priest so he may advise and assist you in your specific situation.

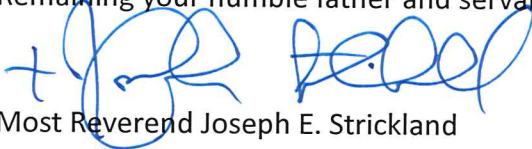
As part of the Body of Christ, we must remember that all people are children of God; Christ shed His blood for each and every person. We love and welcome our non-Catholic brothers and sisters, and we should seek to invite them into the fullness of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church whenever possible. I encourage you to share your faith and invite them to attend Holy Mass with you, even though they are unable to receive Communion. As part of sharing your faith, I ask that you share with them why the Eucharist is so special and why it is reserved only for Catholics who are in a state of grace (without mortal sin) and who are in full communion with the Church.

There is no shortage of great saints who spoke and wrote eloquently about the beauty, power, and spiritual efficacy of the Eucharist, from early Church Fathers such as St. Justin Martyr and St. Ignatius of Antioch, to Doctors of the Church such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, to saints of more modern times such as St. Peter Julian Eymard and Pope St. Pius X. I encourage all to make a commitment to learn from faithful saints such as these in order to deepen our love and appreciation of our Eucharistic Lord who gave His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity in a perfect sacrifice for the salvation of the world.

The beauty of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, calls us to an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus Christ, living and present among us. Let us seek a more profound faith that Jesus Christ who walked among us two thousand years ago remains with us as He promised. The sacraments are Christ among us, calling us to live His sacrificial love in all our interactions with other members of His Body the Church.

May Our Lord bless you and may Our Blessed Mother intercede for you as you continue to grow in faith, hope and charity.

Remaining your humble father and servant,



Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland
Bishop of Tyler, Texas